FASHION FORWARD

THE FIFTH FASHION FORWARD SYMPOSIUM

FASHION AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY:
EXPLORING FASHION'S ROLE IN HUMAN PSCHYE, HISTORY & CULTURE

On April 25th, **Fashion Forward** held its fifth public event, on fashion and collective memory.

Speaker Series:

The Speaker Series included three 15-minute lectures with 5-minute Q+As from pioneering experts who work in fashion exploring fashion's role in human psyche, history & culture. Dr. Tom Guarriello, Sem Devillart, and Dr. Benjamin Wild came together to provide insights on fashion as a facilitator of collective memory.

Dr. Tom Guarriello originated fashion preferences and reactions to three kinds of world-shaping memories: species memory, cultural memory, and personal memory. Species memories, he explained, refer to "deep evolutionary structures and modules that have been passed onto us from our ancestors from millions of years". Emotions and expressions are conduits for these deep-rooted memories which people actively apply in order to understand themselves and others. He described cultural memory as "marching bands in a parade" as people spend their lives in cohorts identifying with other members, developing, maintaining, and passing down common signs and practices. One example for a cohort is generations, now seven of them co-existing at the same time, shaped by strikingly different (fashion) images. And finally, personal memory, the most specific kind, based on individual traits and preferences. These three different kinds of memories, old and new, general and specific, influence how we make sense of objects and experiences, an ultimately how we remember, collectively.

But how is it possible that even though we have very different styles, preferences, the likelihood that we still associate the same items and patterns with specific decades is very high, began **Sem Devillart**. Why do we associate shoulder pads with the 1980s when in reality there were so many styles co-existing at the same time? For example, spaghetti dresses were all over, yet we only think of them in relation to the 1990s. "There are multiple styles in a particular point of time and yet our memory seems to select only a few. Under which criteria do we edit the past?… What makes shoulder pads stronger than spaghetti dresses?"

"I think that the memory selects and clusters information in patterns. It is a kind of shortcut the brain does in order to simplify complexity". Objects that survive in our memory share similar traits with other items of their time. "I call it motives. So the shoulder pad has a particular motive that other phenomena at the same time had as well", she said. In the time when shoulder pads were trending, big hair was trending too, and the most popular chewing gum Hubba Bubba was a best-seller (passing into oblivion by the 90s). Steroid ridden bodies, cocaine, and wealthy TV characters (think Dallas) took front stage, and just like family members, they were linked with one common DNA: all BIG. It is not that there were no other kind of TV characters, people did not consume other types of drugs, or dressed differently throughout the decade, but those media lacked the main the motif, the common denominator of the data set that characterized the the 80s, shaping our collective memory of it.


As we emerge from the pandemic, **Dr Benjamin Wild** observes a sense of longing for unity, and the wide-spread uncertainty what that unity entails. Consequently, the very notion of culture and history are being examined: who we are, and how we connect to others. This quest that calls cultural institutions and rituals into question is in direct relation with "collective memory", a term widely used by the mid- nineteenth century. While the word can be traced back to the 1850s, it was not until post-WWI that its meaning crystalized, which is now, post-covid- and collective- distress, is once again re-investigated.

Dr. Wild distinguishes between two kind of memories that shape collective memory: communicative and cultural. Communicative memory takes place in the "every day" context, as gossip, jokes, advice. Through communicative memory, people unintendedly galvanize the social expectations their community holds. But there is also cultural memory, such as dress, art, or language, which is more associated with institutions, and as a result, it is more "distant". They both shape where people belong, and where they don't. Whereas collective memory suggests homogeneity in remembering, the truth could not be further. Since people do not live in hermetically closed cultures, but in complex and layered ones, where both communicative and cultural memories as diverse, cultural collisions are inevitable.

Hence, cultural transmission is inevitable, it is always ongoing. By accepting differences and the idea that hybridization is an inescapable dimension of social and cultural evolution, we can effectively take steps towards a more inclusive society. While nostalgia may be comforting in time of adversity, it is hybridity that moves us forward.

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS
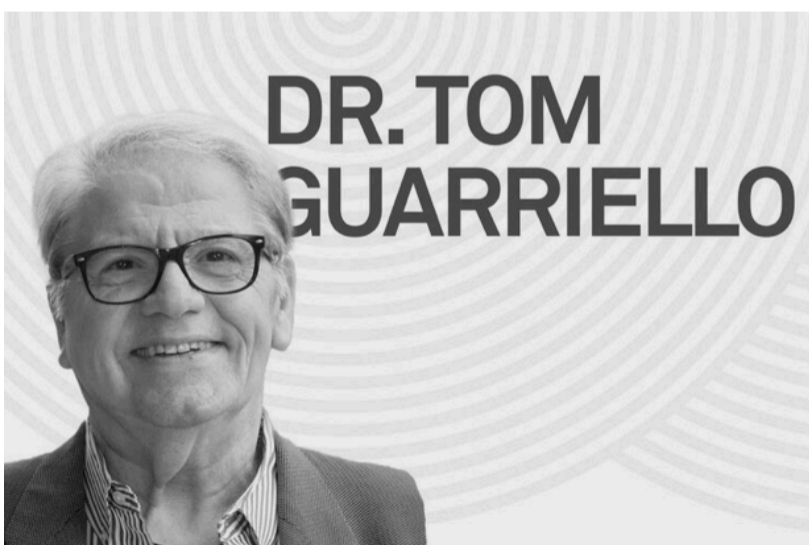
Dr. Tom Guarriello spent decades helping people understand their own, and other people's, minds. After receiving a PhD in psychology, he spent 25 years in clinical practice, then pivoted into organizational psychology. Since the mid-90s, he's worked as a brand consultant, frequently in the fashion industry. He is currently at the forefront of the increasingly relevant field of human/robot interaction.

At the School of Visual Arts Masters in Branding program, Tom teaches "The Meaning of Branded Objects," a course exploring the psychological mechanisms that transform everyday objects/experiences into important components of every modern person's identity.

More about Dr. Tom Guarriello

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Sem Devillart is a cultural analyst and futurist focused on visual and online culture. For the last fifteen years she has collaborated with top organizations on innovative methods to turn cultural signals into high-value intelligence, media content, products and business models. Sem was the chief architect at startup Sparks and Honey, a responsive, data driven creative agency at Omnicom in New York City. Currently she is a member of the Harmony Labs team who look to understand how the inner mechanics of media influences work. Sem is a founding faculty member of the Masters Branding Program at the School of Visual Arts in New York where she teaches methods in trend forecasting. Sem studied design, art history and comparative religion in Tuebingen and Milan and grew up on three continents between seven languages- an early training in pattern recognition.

More about Sem Devillart

Dr. Benjamin Wild is a cultural historian and currently Senior Lecturer in Contextual Studies (Fashion) at Manchester Fashion Institute, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. He maintains links with a number of art and cultural institutions, including the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Royal Academy, where he has run courses and delivered lectures. Themes within Benjamin's work include identity, marginality and cultural appropriation. His current book projects include *Wearing Culture: Controversy, Negotiation and the Pursuit of Fashion*, and *Appropriation* for Bloomsbury's new Fashion in Action series.

More about Dr. Benjamin Wild

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The aim of this symposium was to help facilitate a discourse embracing inclusivity and diversity. We will be continuing this series in 2021 by featuring speakers from various backgrounds to discuss issues such as the fashioned body, (de)colonial fashion, and more.

ABOUT FASHION FORWARD

Fashion Forward is a think tank founded to challenge the conventional discourse around the fashion system. We take macro frameworks of analysis and create multi-level solutions for some of the world's most pressing issues in fashion and fashion-adjacent industries. Through a multidisciplinary lens, we unravel changes and disruptions in fashion, distilling diverse and unexpected data into intelligent insights, and frame them within accessible media such as exhibitions, white papers, public speaking, cultural guides, and consulting services. We help people access critical information, empower thoughtful decision-making, and turn abstract ideas into human-centered solutions.

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